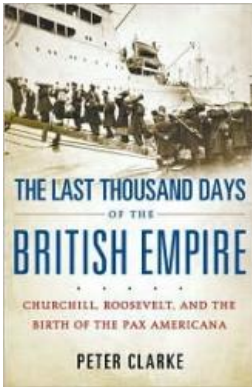


Ten for the History Books — Summer Reading [Part 2]

Tuesday, June 3, 2008

History makes for compelling reading precisely because each reader is building a master narrative of the world. The more history we know and understand, the richer and more interesting that master narrative becomes. The more we know, the more we *want* to know.



6. Peter Clarke, *The Last Thousand Days of the British Empire: Churchill, Roosevelt, and the Birth of the Pax Americana* (Bloomsbury Press, 2008).

The way World War II is stereotypically remembered is that America came to Britain's aid and then the two English-speaking nations were joined by the Soviet Union in the great crusade to end the Nazi threat. There is truth in that recounting, of course, but what that account misses is the fact that Britain and the United States had overlapping but not identical concerns and goals.

Britain — and Winston Churchill in particular — wanted to put an end to the Third Reich and to preserve her empire and her historic role in the world. America — and Franklin Roosevelt in particular — was deeply suspicious of empire and wanted to replace Britain on the world scene.

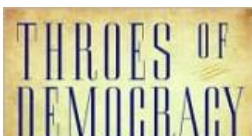
The end of the war found America economically and politically stronger than before the conflict. For Britain the reverse was the case. Britain was economically bankrupt even as its empire was fading into history. American power was on the ascent and the world would never be the same.

Clarke makes a big argument and paints on a big canvas. *The Last Thousand Days of the British Empire* is a book that will make the reader think and rethink about these crucial days in the twentieth century.

An excerpt:

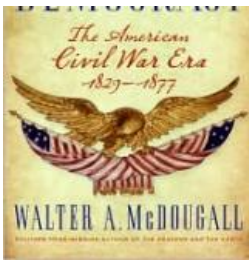
The Second World War was a shock to the Americans and the British alike, with two not unimportant differences. First, it made the United States willy-nilly, into the dominant world power; and secondly, while the Gross National Product of Europe fell by about 25 per cent, that of the United States rose during the war by over 50 per cent in real terms. It was not the first time, nor the last, that Americans claimed to have lost their innocence. They took time to accept the idea of their new international role. Many British people, who had been brought up on quite different assumptions, took time to accept that it was a good idea at all.

This migration of power across the Atlantic was bound to happen, sooner or later. The United States is forty times bigger in area, its population today more like five times bigger than Great Britain's. That is a huge disparity; and though the population gap is now wider than in the 1930s, the British were aware throughout the twentieth century that they were fighting in a league above their natural size.



7. Walter A. McDougall, *Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era* (Harper, 2008).

Walter A. MacDougall is a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian who has the ability to make the



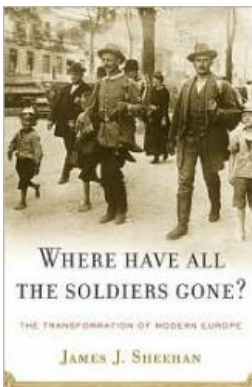
reader think about a familiar era in a new perspective. In *Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era*, McDougall has produced a truly important reconsideration of how America entered and emerged out of the Civil War. This work follows on the heels of his earlier work, *Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History 1585-1828* (Harper-Collins 2004).

Readers of *Throes of Democracy* will want to pay special attention to McDougall's addictive endnotes and his sidebars on the states. He writes like an author who just can't wait for the reader to be as pleased with an illustration or anecdote as he is.

An excerpt:

The Civil War was not a tragedy in the classical sense—unless Americans' tragic flaw was their refusal to acknowledge tragedy at all. The Americans' civic religion simply did not permit them to imagine national failure, indelible sin, a pilgrim's regress. So even though millions of Caucasian, African, and Native American men and women emerged from the Civil War as losers in terms of pursuing their happiness, the dominant national memory of the war quickly became that of a glorious, victorious crusade. Even Memorial Day, first observed in 1865 and made a legal holiday by New York state in 1873, became an occasion for flowers and flags (Decoration Day) at cemeteries and ceremonies to honor the dead on both sides and the glorious chapter they added to the American epic. What, no soul searching? How did that happen?

The most obvious answer is that history is written by the victors. Yankee intellectuals exploited their cultural dominance to profess that the war proved the moral and material superiority of northern civilization: survival of the fittest raised to the level of providence. There could be nothing tragic about a war that freed the slaves and saved the Union (ignoring the questions of why, how, and for what the war had been waged). Thus did Thomas Wentworth Higginson observe in 1870: "We are accustomed to say that the war and its results have made us a nation, subordinated local distinctions, cleared us of our chief shame, and given us the pride of a common career. This being the case, we may afford to treat ourselves to a little modest self-confidence." The key words are the first three: "We are accustomed." In truth, the Civil War caused a wound in American life that no stitches could mend, and so few cultural surgeons even tried to mend it.



8. James J. Sheehan, *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone? The Transformation of Modern Europe* (Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

Here is one of the great questions of our times: How (and why) could Europe transform itself from a continent of great massed armies into a continent that is largely demilitarized? Sheehan argues that the great European wars of the twentieth century were so destructive that Europe effectively abandoned war as an instrument of national policy.

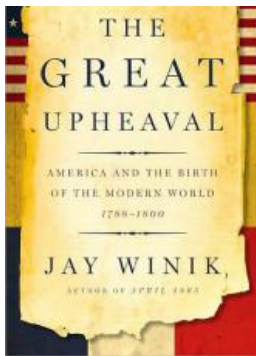
Where Have All the Soldiers Gone? also looks at how Europe has reinvented itself into "a new kind of European state" — a unique political order. Will it last? History does not suggest that it will, but Sheehan's account of Europe's military history from the onset of World War I to the present makes for thoughtful reading.

An excerpt:

Beginning in London and Paris on November 11, 1920, and then spreading to almost every belligerent nation, a place of honor was reserved for one unknown soldier, whose bones were chosen at random to represent those who died in battle. Located under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris and in the nave of Westminster Abbey in London, the tomb of the warrior "known only to God" became a ceremonial focus for annual commemorations of the war and the site where visiting dignitaries paid tribute to the nation's war dead. The symbolic value of the unknown soldier was, of course, meaningful only if people assumed that the dead could be identified and their graves could be appropriately marked and preserved. For most of the history of war, only the greatest warriors were remembered; the rest were buried without ceremony in some hastily dug pit. Until the twentieth century, the nameless corpse left on the battlefield was the accepted norm, not the symbolically powerful exception.



9. Jay Winik, *The Great Upheaval: America and the Birth of the Modern World 1788-1800*



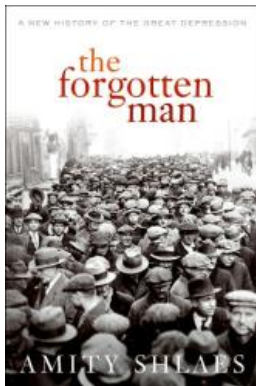
(Harper, 2007).

Jay Winik scored big when he wrote *April 1865*, a book that became one of the best-selling works of history to appear in recent decades. *The Great Upheaval* is a far larger work in every way. It takes the last years of the eighteenth century into view with a focus on what these crucial years meant for America, France, and Russia. As he tells the story of this time of upheaval, the American Revolution was a fragile and nearly-miraculous success, the French Revolution was a tragic unleashing of passion, and the Russian response to the French revolution sowed the seeds of eventual disaster.

What Winik helps the reader to see is the tremendous intellectual foment of this era and the way the modern world emerged from the tumult of these times. *The Great Upheaval* is a massive work on a neglected period of history.

An excerpt:

At the core of the problem, of course, was the remarkable yet perplexing nature of America. For all its genius—and genius is the right word—the U.S. Constitution was an uncertain guide. Until this point, constitutions were not national codes, but national inheritances. They were not written down, but existed almost intuitively, the ethereal sum of a whole country's charters, statutes, habits, traditions, informal understandings, and declarations. Yet for the Founders, what had started out as an exercise to do little more than revise the Articles of Confederation—a loose system designed for the exigencies of the revolutionary War—had instead produced a far more audacious gamble, an entirely new body of laws. Nowhere on the planet had anything quite like it been devised, and actually set down on paper: a central government with authority to tax and maintain an army, dividing its power with sovereign state governments, which of course was precisely one of the very things over which the British Empire and America had split. And at the same time, it created a republican system with its powers scrupulously divided among a president, a House of Representatives, a Senate, and Supreme Court. But—and it is a big but—when it came to articulating America as one nation, the men in Philadelphia flinched.



10. Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression*

(HarperCollins, 2007).

How did America survive and emerge from the Great Depression? Most historians point to the massive expansion of government spending that was the central thrust of the New Deal, President Franklin Roosevelt's plan to save the nation and its economy from ruin. Shlaes makes a remarkable yet compelling argument. She argues that the real heroes of the Great Depression were the ordinary Americans who forged a new economy out of the rubble and confusion of the Depression.

Shlaes faults both Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt for their leadership in the struggle, but she writes with a sympathetic understanding of what both men faced and what both presidents attempted to do. Her analysis fits no simple category, even as the Great Depression resists any simplistic understanding. *The Forgotten Man* is especially relevant given the economic issues of our own times.

An excerpt:

Hoover's priggish temperament, as much as any philosophy he held, caused him to both misjudge the crash and fail in his reaction to it. And his preference for Germany as a negotiating partner over Soviet Russia later blinded him to the dangers of Nazism. Roosevelt by contrast had a wonderful temperament, and could get along, when he felt like it, with even his worst opponent. His calls for courage, his Fireside Chats, all were intensely important. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself"—in the darkness, Roosevelt's voice seemed to shine. He allowed Cordell Hull to write trade treaties that in the end would benefit the U.S. economy enormously. Roosevelt's dislike of Germany, which dated from childhood, helped him to understand the threat of Hitler—and, eventually, that the United States must come to Europe's side.

Still, Hoover and Roosevelt were alike in several regards. Both preferred to control events and people. Both underestimated the strength of the American economy. Both doubted its ability to right itself in a storm. Hoover

mistrusted the stock market. Roosevelt mistrusted it more. Roosevelt offered rhetorical optimism, but pessimism underlay his policies. Though Americans associated Roosevelt with bounty, his insistent emphasis on sharing—rationing, almost—betrayed a conviction that the country had entered a permanent era of scarcity. Both presidents overestimated the value of government planning. Hoover, the Quaker, favored the community over the individual. Roosevelt, the Episcopalian, found laissez-faire economics immoral and disturbingly un-Christian.

Enjoy these thoughtful books — and seek to better understand the times.

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